

Lights and Shadows

Volume 22 *Lights and Shadows* Volume 22

Article 30

1978

The Gatherers

Angela Lawson

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ir.una.edu/lightsandshadows>



Part of the [Fiction Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Lawson, A. (1978). The Gatherers. *Lights and Shadows*, 22 (1). Retrieved from <https://ir.una.edu/lightsandshadows/vol22/iss1/30>

This Prose is brought to you for free and open access by UNA Scholarly Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Lights and Shadows by an authorized editor of UNA Scholarly Repository. For more information, please contact jpate1@una.edu.

The Gatherers
Angela Lawson

I had known that the gatherers would come. Late in July, I lay with my bedroom window open and listened to the pecans knock upon the roof, slide down the shingles and hit the grass with soft, plopping sounds. The nuts fell from three trees in the side yard of my mother's house. They would drop and ripen or rot on the ground during the fall, and in August I would walk upon the green, loosely fitted husks of them, crushing many. I'd wonder as I watched the squirting green ooze stain my toes, whether my mother and I would find the time to collect and store all of them. But it never mattered whether we did or not because I knew that the gatherers would come.

They came early in September. As I drove into the drive, home from school, I counted fourteen of them shuffling through the unraked leaves. Most of them were black and very young or very old. They moved across the lawn like a multitude of people who have just dropped and lost something on the ground as they searched for the fruit. Rarely speaking to each other, they wandered silently in their own search, and I had always wondered whether any of them would see me or not if I did move to speak to them.

I swore to myself as I parked the car in the backyard that I would say something this year; for six years they had come, every time that the rich, meaty nuts fell, and I had never said anything to them. One year I had even practiced what I would say. "Hey, everybody," I would say, very loudly, but amiably.

"Everybody, could I please have your attention for a moment."

I would watch them raise their eyes and wait politely and then I would say, "I realize that there is an abundance of pecans in my mother's yard this year. I know that you enjoy them, but we do too, so I'm afraid I'm going to have to ask you to leave and come back in two days so we can have time to gather what we need and want. Then you're welcome to all you can find."

As I had practiced my little speech, in my mind I could see them nod their heads in agreement and begin to leave. I would call out to them as they left, "My mother and I feel that this is the best thing to do. Please don't be offended."

But I did not give the speech last year. Instead, I had watched them come for several days until one day I confronted my mother.

"Mother, did you notice that those people are back again?"

She was defrosting the old General Electric and backing out of its gleaming enamel sides, she said, "Yes, I know." She wrung the cloth out into a dishpan and ducked her head back into the refrigerator door.

"Well, aren't you going to say something to them? I mean, after all, we haven't had a chance to pick up more than a handful of nuts this year. They're going to be all gone, if we don't make those people go."

She leaned back out and rolled back from her knees onto the floor.

"I'm not going to run them off," she said, slowly, and she looked at me calmly. "You can say something if you want to."

That was all she had said. I sulked for several days, angry with her tolerance, and I even got up in the night from my bed to gather nuts in the chilling autumn darkness. But the days passed and I didn't give the speech.

As I walked around to the front of the house, watching the new group

of gatherers drop their findings in buckets and paper bags, I thought of trying the speech again. Clearing my throat, I looked to catch someone's eye to begin my announcement. One little black boy, the first gatherer I approached, did catch my look, but before I could speak, he turned his back and hurried away from me.

"Heh, little boy," I called, but he did not turn so I called out again, "Heh, little boy." I looked past him. The crowd toward which he walked did not look up when I spoke. They didn't seem to hear me.

I ran after the boy, and catching his thin-bladed shoulder in my hand, I whirled him about to face my reddening face. "I want to tell you something . . .," I began, but suddenly, in a fit of fear and obstinance, he slapped my arm away, shouting, "Leave me alone!" His eyes were wide and he thrust his chin out with the words, then jerked away. He didn't leave. Instead, he continued his picking, darting about the yard, avoiding my stare of shock and bewilderment. I began to walk rapidly, blindly around to the front door. The living room and den were quiet, so I walked back to my mother's bedroom. She was there, sitting by a reading lamp with sewing in her hands.

She looked up at me when I came into the room.

"They're back again," I flung the words at her irritably and throwing my books upon the bed, I crossed to the window, and drew back the drapes to look out at them. "They're back, just like the last time. They didn't ask if they could come. Just like the other times." The words rushed out in anger as I watched the little black boy drop pecans into the corner of his shirt tail. "I bet they've come and gone all day." I said. "It's almost six o'clock and still they grap them up. We haven't even picked up enough for a pie."

"You were up last night, getting some, weren't you?" my mother asked calmly.

"I got only a few," I objected quickly. I had gone out the night before, when the neighborhood was dark and silent. The air was cold, almost as cold as the long shadows that the autumn moon cast across the old house. Dead leaves crackled beneath my feet as I picked and the sound brought back the memory of my grandfather's hoarse, grating voice. I remembered the times when he had lived with us in the old house. He was dying when I, as a child, knew him and in his pain, he had raged for nights on end. He spent long, sleepless hours roaming through the house mumbling angrily to himself. Many times I ran out of the house into the peace of the night to escape the sound of this ranting. One October night, when I ran out of the house to sit beneath the huge old pecan trees, I began to pick up the nuts around my feet. I had almost a lapful, when my grandfather suddenly appeared. He was in his pajamas and he held a cup of coffee in his hand.

"What are you doing out here!" He shouted and I jumped to my feet, spilling the nuts.

"Who told you that you could pick up these nuts?" He kicked at a couple of pecans. "I didn't say you could have any. I didn't tell you to pick some for me, did I?"

I shook my head, but couldn't speak.

"You're a leech," he raged, "That's what you are—all these years you and your mother have sucked the blood out of my life. You've lived in my house and picked my pecans all these years!"

His eyes were wild and his thin, tall body shook with pain and weakness. I fled to my room and lay wide-eyed with fear and an uneasy, uncertain shame until the daylight faded the bright coldness of the night.

As I remembered and once again felt the autumn chill, I wondered if I had ever told my mother about that night.

I turned away from the window and looked at her again.

"I got only a few," I repeated. "They are our trees, after all, aren't they? Have you said anything to them?" But I knew as I asked it, that she had done nothing to dissuade the gatherers. She looked up from her sewing

"Does it really bother you that much?" she asked, sighing slightly. The lamp light shone upon the frown that settled around her eyes.

"Well, don't you want to have first rights to your property?" I could hardly control the incredulity in my voice. "Does it mean nothing to you that they never ask, that they come when they please, as if the land was their own?"

"You know that I never get around to picking up all those nuts, not with the spare time shortage that I have," she answered, and picking up her sewing again, she added, matter-of-factly, "I'm not going to run them off."

"Well, I will!" I screamed at her and ran from the room back out into the front yard where the gatherers still perused the ground. I ran out into the midst of them, and shaking with rage, I shouted into the air above my head, "May I have your attention, please!"

No one stopped. No one looked at me.

"Listen to me!" I screamed again and I looked around to find the little little black boy's

Still no one stopped.

"This is my house, my yard!" I yelled and I began to run from one to another of them, shouting the words into their faces, which did not yield to my presence, but which turned from me as did the little black boy's belligerent, puffing face.

Suddenly I saw him, standing in the propped-open front screen door. I stopped abruptly and, falling weakly to my knees upon the grass, I stared at my mother as she handed a large brown paper sack to the boy. I could hear faintly, the thank you he muttered shyly as he snatched it and let the screen pop to.

He came down the steps then, and looked at me as he passed. Sweat dripped from his thin, black face, and he turned from me to glance at my mother for assurance, then began once more to gather the nuts.

My mother walked out to the steps and called to me.

"I told him he could pick today and tomorrow," she said.

The words fell upon me like a blow and as I watched her go back inside, I sank slowly to the ground with my face to the azure, autumn sky.

I lay there for some time, feeling the coldness of the ground and the hardness of the ripe pecans upon my back. I scarcely noticed as the sound of crushing leaves gradually died away. Finally, the wet evening dew began to chill me and I sat up, startled, suddenly, to see my mother standing on the sidewalk near me.

"You'd better come in," she said quietly. "You'll catch a cold."

First Place Short Story